

WYCOMBE MANAGER BRIAN LEE TO RETIRE

STORY BY STUART EARP

BRIAN LEE, the most successful manager in the history of Wycombe Wanderers Football Club, is to retire before the end of the season. Mr. Lee announced his resignation to the club's committee last week.

The actual date of his departure is not yet clear for the manager is staying on until his successor is named. It is unlikely he will go before the two major cup competitions are over for Wycombe.

In his statement, Mr. Lee points out he wished to resign at the end of last season but due to the ill health of the club chairman, Jack Smethurst, he decided to stay on until Mr. Smethurst improved. The death of the chairman last week, however, left the way clear for Mr. Lee to stand down due to pressure of work as director of Bisham Abbey National Sports Centre in Marlow.

Wycombe's new chairman, Reg Williams, accepted the resignation at last week's meeting. He paid tribute to the manager in this statement.

"The officers and committee of Wycombe Wanderers Football Club, having received with regret the resignation of Brian Lee, fully understand the reason for his decision and wish to publicly express their appreciation to Brian of his great achievements during the seven years he has been manager of the club.

In further appreciation of the successful services Brian has rendered to the club, the committee have granted Brian a testimonial match which will take place at a date to be mutually agreed."

Brian Lee joined Wycombe Wanderers in December 1968, taking over from Barry Darvill. He immediately made an impact by disbanding the selection committee which had operated in the past and took full charge of the team. The reserve team was axed for financial reasons and Mr. Lee got to work in building a squad. He asked John Reardon, who had taken Chesham United to Wembley previously, to join him. John accepted and formed a formidable team.

Several players departed, amongst them Paul Bates and later Len Worley, two

stars of the past, who were not in the manager's plans.

At the same time, Mr. Lee was in full time employment as director of Bisham Abbey — an extremely busy job and one that has finally led to his resignation as manager. But Mr. Lee's position at Bisham enabled him to meet with some of the leading amateur players in the South who trained there regularly with Charles Hughes' England squad.

THIS is the statement issued by manager Brian Lee, which he read out to the club committee last Wednesday. At the end of last season I resigned my position of team manager at Wycombe Wanderers to the chairman, Jack Smethurst. In my professional life I am concerned with a new £2m development at Bisham Abbey and would be unable to carry out my duties efficiently, due to lack of time and, therefore, wish to retire from team management at a mutually convenient time. When I was appointed in December, 1968, I said I would be able

"because of time", to accept the post for three years! Mr. Smethurst requested me to continue until he was enjoying better health and when 'contract' football had been established. I again repeated the action after the Anglo Italian Trophy and, it was through respect for him that I remained, but felt that since his distressing death and subsequent rumours, it is right and proper to make this statement.

I have been very proud of my association with the club and the privilege to have managed a group of good players over the years. There

Slowly, top players began to join the club. John Delaney signed from Slough, Ted Powell from Sutton, Peter Suddaby, Paul Fuschillo were others. Before long, the manager had one of the strongest squads in the Isthmian League. By the end of his first season, Wycombe finished runners up in the league, trailing just one point behind Enfield. For those who were interested only in the glamour of cup football, notably the Amateur Cup, they were told quite firmly by the manager — "The league championship must be the priority, cup competitions second."

Mr. Lee, rightly in my view, felt cups were won over half a dozen games. Titles lasted a whole season, sustained interest, all round and were the superior achievement. He lived up to his word.

With an ever-improving squad, success followed Brian constantly. He was fast gaining a reputation as a man dedicated to attacking football and, contrary to popular belief, he soon demonstrated that attacking football paid dividends away from Loakes Park as well as at home. In 1970-71, Wycombe won the league by pipping Sutton by a single point. They lost only four matches.

At the time, Mr. Lee stated publicly it would be more difficult retaining that championship than winning it. "Everyone will be coming to Loakes Park hell bent on beating us," he said. Everyone came, but no-one quite managed it. Some came close, Dulwich Hamlet and Hayes in particular, but from November 1972 until this

season, no team won a league match at Loakes Park. The complete record read: P.52, W.42, D.10, L.0, G.F.130, G.A.35.

Sure enough, Wanderers did retain that championship with what Brian regards as his best ever side whilst at Wycombe. But there had been one real disappointment during the season. The Blues had done well in the Amateur Cup. They reached the semi-final and met Hendon in front of a bumper crowd but they went down 2-1 at Brentford. Hendon went on to beat Enfield at Wembley and it was to be the

title which now read: Rothmans Isthmian League.

Rothmans introduced a plan almost tailor-made for Brian Lee. They wanted more positive attacking football, less disciplinary trouble and more goals. Lee and Rothmans got on fine. He was soon drawing those £40 bonuses and chalked up a total of 11 before the end of the season. Wanderers won the league again — this time by two points — and received a fat cheque of £1,675 at the Rothmans dinner in London.

That season Wanderers, under

the chairman, said the club committee wished to award me a testimonial game, which I am very pleased and proud to accept. May I record my gratitude to Mr. Smethurst for all his continuous interest, support and guidance and wish the club further success and enjoyment in the future.

BRIAN LEE

Lee's guidance, also had the best run in the F.A. Cup for a long time. They beat Newport 3-1 at home before going out to a superior Peterborough side at Loakes Park. The Posh triumphed 3-1. All in all, however, that season was the best the club had achieved for many years. It seemed impossible they could hope to match it again.

They not only did that... they bettered it.

The 1974-75 season proved the most glorious in the 90 year history of the club. At first league results were inconsistent. But a run in the F.A. Cup brought, the best out of the players, which included newcomers Alan Phillips and Gary Hand. Larry Pritchard had left but as always, Lee found the answer bringing in new boys Howard Kennedy and Dave Alexander to midfield.

Wycombe reached the second round of the F.A. Cup for the fourth time and drew Bournemouth at home. They were held 0-0 but won the replay 2-1 at Dean Court amidst tremendous excitement. Wycombe had drawn Middlesbrough at home, managed by Jack Charlton and second in the Football League Division One on goal average. It was here that Brian Lee proved the pressman's dream.

He came out quite sincerely with: "We've got no chance" — and he meant it too. Brian maintained at the time and still does: "If Middlesbrough play at the best, Wycombe will not touch them". The Big Match cameras were there as the Blues held

mighty Boro to a goalless draw. Then, three days later, Wycombe defied Charlton's predictions of "Murder at Ayresome Park" but losing only 1-0 in the 89th minute of the replay in front of 30,000 people.

When the crowd rose to the amateurs at the end of the tie, giving them a standing ovation, it was one of the finest moments of the manager's career. He couldn't hope to better it.

At the time, Wycombe's hopes of retaining the title looked slim. They were in 10th position in the table with Enfield miles out ahead at the top. Mr. Lee buckled down to the task in hand. The result? Wycombe did not lose another league game that season and clung onto their title with a 1-0 win over Dagenham in the last match of the season. It was enough to pip Enfield by one tenth of a goal. Lee had done it again.

It was at this time that Brian wanted to call it a day. A realist, he knew full well he couldn't better that record. But the chairman's illness and long stay in hospital persuaded him to postpone his resignation until this week.

As can be seen by his track record, Brian Lee has been one of the most successful in the Isthmian League. He had his 'downs' as well as the many 'ups', though. There was that Berks and Bucks Senior Cup saga last year when, on the manager's instructions, the players refused to collect their medals and the trophy. By doing this, Lee felt he had made his protest to the Association's repeated refusals over the London Senior Cup. Although severely censured by the F.A., Brian still felt that he had made his point. And that is Brian Lee for you — a dedicated man with sky-high standards in football, he will always speak his mind and stick to his principles.

Throughout his seven years with the club, Mr. Lee has been respected by players and public alike. The manager has always put his players first and during his time, Brian maintains he has never had to sack anyone.

Several players in the professional ranks have benefited from his coaching (he is a qualified F.A. coach), Peter Suddaby, Paul Fuschillo, Ken Swain, Alan Gane, Viv Busby, Steve Perrin, Brian gave all these and more the chance to turn professional when he could have advised against it and hung onto valuable members of his side.

It would have been easy for Brian Lee to have overstayed his welcome at Wycombe.

Wanderers, living on his success of the past, Brian will not allow that to happen. He feels that the time is right for a change.

He will select his successor subject to committee approval and there can only be speculation as to whom it will be. Lee is looking for a man who will carry on where he left off — no easy task for whoever is selected.

As a mark of appreciation of his services, the club are to stage a testimonial game for his benefit in the future — something which Brian feels is a real honour.

The testimonial is a unique event in amateur football but only a true reward to Brian Lee — the most successful manager in the history of Wycombe Wanderers.

Lee's statement